

# Sleep deprivation costs learners

In Uganda, as in many parts of the world, waking up before dawn to study or work has become almost a badge of honour. Sleep is often treated as a luxury, and those who wake up late are sometimes viewed as lazy.

Meanwhile, there is pride in sleeping just a few hours a night, as if it reflects discipline or commitment. But this culture of early rising and long hours may be quietly harming our children, affecting their academic, emotional and physical wellbeing.

In schools, the pursuit of academic excellence often comes at the expense of something essential: quality sleep.

In many schools, students are expected to recover lost learning time through extended lessons, often beginning before sunrise. With recent government-mandated extensions to school reopening, these sessions may become more common. Long hours have gradually become normalised, driven by teachers and students eager for academic success, but rarely questioning the cost.

Other factors contribute to sleep deprivation. Girls may lose sleep due to household chores or menstrual pain. Noise in school environments, television and internet streaming, and overloaded timetables all play a role. However, excessive academic pressure remains one of the most significant contributors, reflecting how schools prioritise performance, examinations and rankings, while giving limited attention to rest and holistic development.

Sleep deprivation among learners is more than a lifestyle issue; it is a public health concern. A long-term study conducted in Uganda by the Medical Research Council (MRC), the Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), in partnership with Reach A Hand Uganda, found that insufficient sleep contributes to conditions such as hypertension, heart disease and di-

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**Shantala Katana**  
Health



abetes. For young people, however, the most immediate concern is mental health and alertness.

The study revealed worrying patterns. The median sleep duration on school days was just 4.8 hours, rising to 6.5 hours on non-school days. Only 12.8 percent of students reported getting the recommended seven to 11 hours of sleep on school days, and 38.5 percent on non-school days. Boarding students fared worse than day students, experiencing more anxiety, sleep disruption and fatigue.

Environmental and social pressures compound the problem. Heavy workloads, wake-up times as early as 3am, peer pressure, extracurricular activities and late-night social interactions all reduce rest. Day students face additional challenges such as household responsibilities, overcrowded homes and unrestricted screen time. Many learners report dozing off in class simply to cope. Female students consistently report poorer sleep satisfaction and alertness than their male peers.

While sleep has a profound impact on health and performance, it is unavoidable, hence the need for balance.

There are practical steps learners and

schools can take. Students can set fixed study times, avoid late-night cramming, limit screen use before bed and treat sleep as part of their study plan. Maintaining regular schedules, creating supportive environments and ensuring access to decent bedding can prevent long-term health problems.

Schools, families and communities all have a role to play. Addressing sleep deprivation is part of delivering quality education and protecting learner wellbeing. The findings speak directly to Sustainable Development Goal 3 on Good Health and Wellbeing by highlighting links between sleep, mental health and the prevention of non-communicable diseases. They also support Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education, which emphasises learning environments that enable students to thrive. Ensuring learners are well-rested is therefore essential to achieving both health and education outcomes.

If we are serious about improving learning outcomes and safeguarding children's health, sleep must be recognised as a policy issue, not merely a personal choice. The Ministry of Education and Sports, together with the Ministry of Health, should review school schedules and early-morning routines through a wellbeing lens, guided by evidence on adolescent sleep needs. National school health policies should explicitly include sleep alongside nutrition, mental health and physical activity.

Schools should adopt learner-friendly timetables and balanced workloads. Teacher training institutions can integrate sleep education into learner support frameworks, while parents should be sensitised to understand that rest is essential.

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**Ms Shantala Katana, Lead Gen Z Innovation and Engagement at Reach A Hand Uganda**